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PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH
DE RUEHBK #2042 2300620
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 180620Z AUG 09
FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7935
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2151

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 002042

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR PRM/ANE AND PRM/A; EAP/MLS
GENEVA FOR RMA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/17/2019
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SMIG](#) [TH](#) [LA](#)
SUBJECT: FIRST U.S.-THAI-LAO DISCUSSION ON LAO HMONG IN
PETCHABUN

REF: BANGKOK 2041

Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, reason: 1.4 (b and d).

Classified by: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle,
for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) DCM and RefCoord traveled to Petchabun on August 7 to participate in closed discussions with Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) Deputy Chief of Joint Staff General Vorapong Sa-nga-net, Director of Border Affairs Lt. General Nipat, and Lao counterparts Brigadier General Bouaxieng Champaphahn and MFA spokesperson Khenthong Nuanthasing. The first-ever tripartite meeting on the Lao Hmong was the result of an invitation extended by the RTARF's LTG Nipat to PRM PDAS Samuel Witten during the latter's July 28-August 1 visit to Thailand (reftel). DCM noted U.S. interest in the issue as emanating from history, and concern by U.S. advocacy groups and Congress over those Hmong in Thailand who have valid protection concerns. The DCM advocated for a role for IOM in the Thai repatriation process, and greater international access to the return and reintegration process by the Lao. BG Bouaxieng stated his view that the issue would continue to be handled bilaterally between the RTG and GOL, but that he welcomed the U.S. "as a helpful friend" in the inaugural informal meeting. Bouaxieng noted that the U.S. and Thailand were close allies, and that U.S. - Lao bilateral relations were improving rapidly. When DCM raised the issue, however, neither the RTG nor GOL was willing to discuss how the "screened in" group would be handled, indicating that the sensitive issue would be addressed later - once most of the Petchabun group had been persuaded to return voluntarily. (Comment: It was unclear if the two delegations had discussed the screened in group among themselves in an earlier, private meeting: RTARF Lt. General Nipat later asserted to RefCoord that it had, but a Thai MFA representative present in the meeting said it had not come up. However, according to the MFA "the GOL already knows about the group, we just don't discuss it officially." End comment.)

¶2. (SBU) On the same day, DCM Entwistle participated in a separate meeting with Lao Hmong leaders, the opening stages of which were also attended by the media. Echoing the statement made by PDAS Witten on July 30, the DCM emphasized that there was no Wat Tham Krabok-style resettlement program planned. (Comment: we resisted RTG and GOL entreaties that the public statement rule out any possibility at all for resettlement from Petchabun. An Embassy press release the same day noted that the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program accepts individual referrals of vulnerable individuals, normally from UNHCR. End Comment.) Lao General Bouaxieng read a list of promises to Hmong returnees, including reintegration assistance, and an amnesty to drug abusers and "wife beaters." The Lao delegation included two Hmong who had been repatriated from Petchabun to the GOL site at Ban Pha Lak, Laos. The returnees stated they had not been

persecuted upon return. Reaction by the Hmong leaders was more agitated than in the meeting with PDAS Witten, with several partially disrobing to show scars they claimed were inflicted by Lao soldiers. In response, Lao General Bouaxieng lectured the Hmong on "behaving properly" and obeying the law once they returned to Laos. The DCM did not accompany Lao BG Bouaxieng to the camp fence line where he addressed a small rain-soaked crowd directly by megaphone, repeating promises of GOL amnesty and assistance. A semi-comedic attempt by the Thai and Lao delegations to convince one large family to return to Laos on the Lao army helicopter to Vientiane failed when the husband and wife quarreled over the decision, a family drama played out in full view of the assembled press.

JOHN